



EPA plans scientific assessment of Bristol Bay watershed

Assessment responds to concerns of tribes, businesses, and others about development proposals

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(Anchorage, Alaska—Feb. 7, 2011) The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency will conduct a scientific assessment of the Bristol Bay watershed to better understand how future large-scale development projects may affect water quality and Bristol Bay's salmon fishery, an extraordinary salmon resource for the United States. EPA initiated this assessment in response to concerns from federally-recognized tribes and others who petitioned the agency in 2010 to assess any potential risks to the watershed.

"The Bristol Bay watershed is essential to the health, environment and economy of Alaska," said EPA Regional Administrator Dennis McLerran. "Gathering data and getting public input now, before development occurs, just makes sense. Doing this we can be assured that our future decisions are grounded in the best science and information and in touch with the needs of these communities. We look forward to working with Alaskans to protect and preserve this valuable resource."

In 2010, nine federally-recognized Bristol Bay tribes petitioned EPA to use its authority under the Clean Water Act to protect Bristol Bay. Their concerns focused on the potential Pebble Mine project. Two other tribes asked EPA to wait for mining projects to submit permit applications before taking action.

This action today does not represent any regulatory decision by the agency; instead it represents EPA's proactive steps to better understand the watershed and gather important scientific information. This information gathered will inform any future guidelines or actions about how to protect the waters and promote sustainable development.

Bristol Bay is an important source of wild Pacific salmon for commercial, recreational, and subsistence users. It produces hundreds of millions of dollars in annual fisheries revenues. The area may be the last major watershed in North America that produces historic numbers of wild salmon. Most of the Bristol Bay watershed is wildlife refuge or park where large development is restricted. EPA's efforts will focus on those areas that are not protected.

EPA's assessment is not limited to examining the effects of hard-rock mining projects, but will consider the effects of large-scale development in general.

The assessment, which will focus primarily on the Nushagak and Kvichak watersheds, will be informed by scientific peer review, tribal consultation, federal and state agency participation, as well as public and industry input.

EPA will accept and consider public input during development of the watershed assessment and will continue to work closely with tribal governments, state and federal agencies as we undertake this analysis.

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